

Engaging the Mythical

A need for healing in the green movement

Introduction

This short essay comes from a tension I have felt in the wider “green” movement over the time that I have been actively involved (around 5 years). It is a tension that I have perceived on many levels – personal, organisational and institutional. On reflection, it seems to me that the underlying source of the tension is something fundamentally the same.

I believe the tension lies between two perceptions – one that sees people as a problem, and one that sees people as a solution. I declare my interest at the beginning – I have always felt drawn to those who see people as the solution, and felt inner tension and frustration towards those who see people as a problem. It is through a desire to explore where these feelings come from within myself that led me to formulate these ideas – and it is only that: my way of making sense of what I have perceived and felt over the years.

It is also in the knowledge that I have been there too – I remember painfully now the anger and intolerance that I directed at people for their “destruction of the planet and our society”. Looking back, I see that it might have inspired others, but is likely to have done very little to actually engage the people who I was hoping would change. In fact, it probably had the very opposite effect – reinforcing their perceptions of me, and strengthening their belief in their own role.

At a conference organised by the Centre for Human Ecology in 1999 called “For the love of nature?”, Vandana Shiva, a social and environmental activist from India, was asked what she thought of Deep Ecology (1). She replied that she felt it was an important concept, as long as it was accompanied by “Deep Justice”. This hit home for me. It highlighted a paradox I had been grappling with for a while.

I have made many close friends in the green movement, but at the same time I have met many people towards whom I have felt inner resistance. I began to see where this was coming from.

Caught-up in the Mythical

The common element I find amongst the people I feel resistance to is a passion for their work in the green movement, but somehow that passion does not feel authentic – somehow it rings hollow for me. They remind me of who I used to be. In this role of the radical rebel, we throw ourselves into aggressive, uncompromising criticism. If anyone inside the movement tries to challenge our beliefs on anything, they are generally met with a hostile rebuttal, insinuating “how dare you challenge the Truth, oh you of little faith

and understanding...". Real communication stops at this point, a surface relationship is maintained, but underneath there run conflicting currents.

James Hillman (1995) describes what he calls "Rising", which is something I associate this with:

Rising is not a focused power, it is more a heightened level of energy and heightened irritability, a feeling of compression, ready to explode with a head full of plans, too much to do, the body racing [...] Imagination working us like an animal force, giving us head trip after head trip, burning our close surroundings and making us feel that we are coiled protectively around unnamable gifts. Our humanity is eaten by a force that drives the water through the rock. (178/9)

In the state of "Rising" we are in the grip of myth, and we place ourselves in the role of the hero. There is no space for others, except to carry out our orders. The language is one of commitment and direction. Another of Hillman's concepts, "Purism" links closely to this:

Although it may speak the words of inclusive unity, embracing everyone in its vision, the vision itself is sharp and hard as the edge of a sword, utterly exclusive and uncompromising ... On the power trip of the pure there is no time for side trips – or tourists (200)

Reading these two descriptions would probably bring a glow of pride to those in this role – "you have to be like this if you are going to achieve anything in this world". What makes me uneasy about this, is the power-relations in this hero-role – and what lies behind that role.

Control and Power

"To assert self over other, whatever that other may be, puts the other down" (Jung, quoted in Hillman, 95). There is no doubt that this role is rooted in "Power Over" – and it leaves little room either for those you are trying to convince to change, or for those you should be working together with. Its "self-centred absolutism" (Hillman) seems to me to have nothing really to do with the well-being of others (be they human or non-human), and nearly all to do with one's self and own delusions of self-importance. Underlying this, I believe, is a deep-seated form of insecurity.

This insecurity plays itself out in different ways. Firstly it can be projected onto the human race in general through the despair of "I'm not OK, you're not OK" (2). Deep Ecology can become the perfect lifeline - literally sometimes, and we know how strongly a drowning person holds on. In what I believe is a distortion of what Deep Ecology is really all about, the non-human natural world becomes idolised, people are seen as destructive and a problem to be got rid of. This fits the paradigm perfectly, in its negation of humans and therefore of themselves, appeasing our self-doubt.

Secondly, the insecurity can project itself through the envy of “I’m not OK, you’re OK”. It is common knowledge in the world of therapy that if we lose control over one part of our life, we attempt to assert control over another. In this scenario, if we lose control of the most fundamental thing – through doubting our self – we attempt instead to assert control over others and in fact over destiny itself. The future of the planet becomes our mission, and saving it will be achieved by frantic hard-work, shouting louder than the others and total commitment to the ideal. We need our just cause to fight for, and our absolute enemy to fight against. We set ourselves aims which are unobtainable – for to obtain them would leave us without a role, and turn us back to face ourselves. It must be a constant uphill struggle.

The Myth of Redemptive Violence

This latter attitude is the most destructive force – for both the movement for social change as a whole, and the individuals involved. The irony is that this attitude comes from deep within the “Domination System” itself. Walter Wink (1992) names its source as the “myth of redemptive violence”.

The myth of redemptive violence follows a structure: evil chaos attacks, the champion of order fights back but is humiliated, evil chaos prospers, the hero escapes, annihilates the evil and restores order. Wink sees this pattern throughout our civilisation, and traces it right back to Babylon and beyond. He sees it in children’s comics, in video games, Hollywood movies, and the US National Security policy. For those caught up in this in the Green Movement, we are at the stage of evil chaos prospering and good green order starting to fight back. The problem with this myth, is its absolutist view of good and evil, and the justification of the use of force and violence to restore good order. It tends towards simplistic solutions, and yearns for a “messianic redeemer” – which fits the hero-role nicely. It is, Wink says, “in its essence, a totalitarian fantasy”. We need only look to Hitler, Le Pen and Heider to see how the Far Right taps into this mythology.

This illuminates an area that I have been concerned about too – the apparent closeness of some parts of the green movement with that of the Far Right. This is the unease that promoters of Marxism Today tapped into in their controversial Channel Four programme “Against Nature”. Some of the people that they chose and the edits that they made showed how the green movement can be interpreted in a very dangerous light – and it did not come from nowhere. Exposing how the myth of redemptive violence has entered the thinking of some of those in the green movement is essential, and a precursor to the distancing from these attitudes that the green movement must make if it is to survive as a movement that promotes both deep ecological and social justice.

This myth and its self-made heroes are also destructive in terms of the day-to-day working relationships, motivation and effectiveness of the green movement. The absolutism can only lose out in the long-term. Wink puts his finger on it:

Dreams of perfection are fatal to social change movements ... [which] are made up of idealists who are far from perfect. ... Driven by their ideals, they denigrate their own accomplishments as inadequate. ... They burn themselves out trying to live in utopian fashion with all their socialization intact. ... Rather than recognising that we are all racist, or sexist, or undemocratic as a result of our social upbringing, and developing ways to assist people gently in the needed transformation, the movement declares that anyone with these attitudes is a traitor, or a deviant. ... The Powers ... acting from concealment, entice courageous and dedicated people to blame their own personal inadequacies for what are in fact systemically induced delusions. (71)

And also to blame others' "personal inadequacies".

The myth of redemptive violence is structural in our society, Wink argues. Those people who are therefore insecure in themselves, and have some deeper insecurity, are ideal prey for this myth. To take on the role of the redemptive hero is all too tempting, and once in it, it is very comfortable, and extremely difficult to get out of, as everything which happens in the world around us seems to confirm the story and script.

Others also fall into role in our personal myth of redemptive violence. Any attack on our position or beliefs is perceived as chaos attacking, and chaos above all must be resisted to fight for the order that we have constructed. "For the alternative", argues Wink, "- ownership of one's own evil and acknowledgement of God in the enemy - is for many simply too high a price to pay". (29) This price is the acknowledgement that chaos is the reality, that nothing is ever black and white, that all of us have something of good and evil in us, that Good, the Fall and Redemption live alongside each other in our human world - to be able to tolerate ambiguity, paradox and difference. "To face the fear of enemies would finally require us to acknowledge our own inner evil, and that would cost us all our hard earned self-esteem. ... We could no longer rely on absolute weapons for the utter annihilation of an absolute enemy" (30). The world of certainty and our clear role in it would crumble away - and we would be left to face our self - the greatest of all our fears. Being able to accept the evil in others and ourselves provides the release and the light that is inherent in the very name Lucifer, the "carrier of light".

Telling a different story

It becomes very clear to me in all of this how closely the fundamental structures of our civilisation impact on our personal development which then impacts on our work which then in turn feeds back into the structures of society and civilisation. For me our work in the green movement has to be about challenging the fundamental structures, not getting caught up in the myth of redemptive violence, its aggression and destruction - or else we will simply be reinforcing the status quo, and the suffering will go on. In order to

do that, we have to become aware of the way in which we do things, not just the content of our work. How the message is conveyed is as important as the message itself – in fact, they cannot be separated.

The first step is to see people as the solution. To accept that none of us are perfect, and to believe that at each moment in time, everyone is doing the best they can given all the influences on them at that moment, is an immense release into the flow of life. Realising that “making mistakes” is an integral part of our own life, not something to be ashamed of, but something to look at and learn from, means that we are able to accept the weaknesses in others too.

In our campaigning work, we do not demonise and alienate, but rather understand, respect and try to engage with people at the point where they are at. Treat people as demons, and they are more likely to act that way. Treat people as caring and loving human beings and we can expect a more constructive response. As one of the Life Setback cards in the Findhorn Foundation’s Transformation Game says, “You forgot you were a radiantly beautiful cosmic miracle. You forgot everyone else was too!”

We should draw on the wisdom of educators such as Paolo Freire, who understood that people will only become agents of change if they have been involved in working out the problems and solutions for themselves – a belief that people’s “ontological vocation ... is to be a subject who acts upon and transforms his world, and in doing so moves towards ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively.” (Freire 1972, 12) To preach our solutions is using the very same disempowering approach which we need to be overturning. By helping people to identify and name the problems themselves, we are creating a far greater potential for them to do something about a solution.

We need to remember that we have one way of looking at the world, and that although we believe that our ideas would take us fundamentally in the right direction, we must remain open to the possibility that some of our proposed solutions are not as good as we thought. We must invite people from outside the typical core of the movement to bring in their ideas, we must allow ourselves to be challenged, we must continually re-examine our proposed solutions, and be open in public about the fact that our project is one big work in progress, looking for development and refinement. In that very act, we are challenging the core of the culture of redemptive violence – its basis in absolutism. Of course, we can expect the forces of order to do what they can to suppress our “deliberate chaos”, but we must not get drawn into their myth, their way of doing things. With patience and with love, we must go about our work of transformation.

This is what will help to turn the guilt and insecurity that so many people feel into positive energy for change. Most people who are doing work for environmentally and socially destructive organisations know all too well what they are contributing to. They see no alternative to earning a living, and the

internal contradictions between their deep-rooted values of love and respect (which I believe we all have somewhere) and the work which they do, creates enormous psychological and emotional damage. If they could make their work more constructive, I believe they would jump at the opportunity. We need to help people to connect to their deeper values and to engage with those values in their everyday lives – in whatever way they can. This is the work of true healers.

Conclusion

In that spirit, when we come across people or organisations who we perceive as being caught up in the myth of redemptive violence, we must treat them with respect and love. When faced with the violence and aggression of the redemptive hero, it is all too easy to respond in the role you are being put in – either with aggression (Power Over) or child-like sulking and subversion (Power Less). It is essential in this work that we do not simply reverse the Oppressor- Victim roles, as this still fits the original script. It is also important that we don't step in as a Rescuer, thus disempowering and turning the person / organisation that we are dealing with into a dependent victim. Instead, we must approach them from a place of Power With, talk to them in the way we would like them to talk to us. It is not easy, and requires great inner strength, but I believe it is the work that will truly heal and transform our society.

Notes

- (1) Deep Ecology is a movement and a way of understanding life. Arne Naess, one of its key proponents, identified the following elements: A relational, total-field image; Biospherical Egalitarianism; Diversity and symbiosis; Anticlass posture; Fight against pollution and resource depletion; Complexity, not complication; Local Autonomy and Decentralisation (Naess 1994)
- (2) This comes from a part of Transactional Analysis, which includes models for helping to understand why people behave in certain ways in relation to each other. The positions in this model are "I'm not OK, you're OK", "I'm not OK, you're not OK", "I'm not OK, you're OK", "I'm OK, you're OK" – with the goal being to get to the latter position.

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